

Towns County Herald

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Hiawassee to hold Special Election in June

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their regular meeting after press time on Tuesday, March 4, Hiawassee City Council members were expected to greenlight a June Special Called Election to fill the remaining terms of office for the currently vacant mayoral seat and a council seat that will be vacated soon.

Since former mayor Liz Ordiales resigned last year, mayoral duties have been conducted by Mayor Pro Tempore Jay Chastain Jr., a longtime member of the Hiawassee City Council.

According to the Hiawassee City Charter, however, in the event of a vacancy, a

new mayor must be elected "unless such vacancy occurs within three months of the expiration of the term of that office," in which case, a successor mayor may be appointed by the council.

But Ordiales' unexpired term ends Dec. 31 of this year, well outside the three-month mark for appointment, so the city must call an election.

One of the reasons a special election has not already happened is because the city has been working with the Towns County Board of Elections to arrive at a new agreement to host municipal elections, including the regular city elections that are set to take place this November.

That agreement is now

ready to be executed, and council members were expected to approve the contract in their March 4 meeting.

"The Board of Elections and Registration is looking forward to working with the City of Hiawassee for their upcoming elections in both June and November," Elections Board Supervisor Rachel Edwards said last week. "The prior Intergovernmental Agreement had been entered into years before and contained some provisions that needed to be amended. The Board voted to terminate that contract (last year) in favor of a new one.

"The new contract, which has already been ap-

See *Special Election*, Page 12



Hiawassee City Council members used their Feb. 24 work session to discuss the following week's vote to call a June Special Election. Photo by Shelly Knight

Hiawassee City Council opts out of new exemption



No one from the public attended the Hiawassee City Council's called meeting to opt out of the HB 581 floating homestead exemption last Wednesday. Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In recent weeks, the Hiawassee City Council has held three public hearings for local feedback on whether to

opt out of the House Bill 581 floating homestead exemption that was ratified by voters who supported a state constitutional amendment for the exemption in the November General Election.

And in a called meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 26, Hiawassee council members voted unanimously to opt out of the exemption, joining the Young Harris City Council in

See *HB 581 Opt Out*, Page 7

Water Authority works overnight to fix main break

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

It's been a tough year so far for water leaks in the county, with a Jan. 10 main break inside Hiawassee city limits that took an extensive repair on US 76, and now the significant main break in Towns County Water Authority territory from Tuesday, Feb. 25.

Water Authority Manager Jennifer Nichols said the break last week was brought to their attention at about 9 p.m., at which point "all of our guys were dispatched out to repair the leak."

"The leak was on one of our 8-inch water mains alongside Hwy 76 near Brother's Restaurant, and it was sitting on a couple of rocks when our men uncovered the leak," Nichols said. "That entire 20-foot section of pipe had split."

Using the CodeRED Emergency Alert System, the Water Authority notified



customers about the leak and updated its website at <https://townscountywater.com/> with the following information: "We have a major line

break on the west end of our system that has drained our main water tank and has a large amount of our customer

See *Water Main Break*, Page 6

Bradshaw signs resolution for first responder PTSD

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In his Feb. 18 regular meeting, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw adopted a resolution to cover PTSD treatment for first responders pursuant to Georgia House Bill 451, which was signed into law last May and went into effect Jan. 1.

County Attorney Robb Kiker was in attendance to better map out what the resolution and new law entail.

HB 451, better known as the Ashley Wilson Act, amends state law to require

coverage and compensation options for first responders diagnosed with occupation-related post-traumatic stress disorder.

This includes insurance benefits and treatment premiums for trauma sustained in the line of duty and protects first responders from losing their jobs due to or during the treatment of PTSD.

Kiker added that the new law also requires all public entities in the state to offer a supplemental benefit program.

"It creates a once-per-lifetime financial safety net to

See *County Meeting*, Page 7



Cliff Bradshaw
Sole Commissioner

K-9 Dargo assists with meth arrest in traffic stop

News Special

On Thursday, Feb. 27, Towns County Sheriff's Office Investigators and Uniform Patrol K-9 were initiating concentrated patrol and drug suppression.

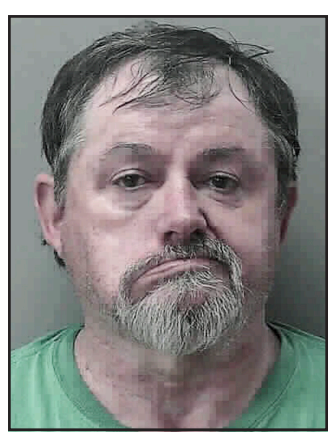
As a result, a traffic stop was initiated on Hwy 76 West, and a free-air sniff was alerted by K-9 Dargo, resulting in probable cause to search the vehicle.

During the search, a plastic bag with a white substance that field-tested positive for methamphetamine was

found. Ricky Dexter Shelton, 63, of Hiawassee, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine, misdemeanor failure to maintain lane, and probation violation.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends the job by the Sheriff's Deputies and K-9, stating that his office would continue concentrated drug-suppression patrol.

All subjects are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



Ricky Dexter Shelton

Accountability Courts celebrate 11 program graduates

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – The North Enotah Drug Court and Parental Accountability Court held their first joint graduation at North Georgia Technical College on Thursday, Feb. 6.

There were 11 graduates total, though one was unable to attend: six from Union County, one from Towns County, as well as four South Enotah graduates, three from White County and one from Lumpkin County.

Drug Court Coordinator Amanda Bryant said such graduations serve a twofold purpose: not only do they allow people to celebrate how

far they've come after what are usually the lowest points of their lives, but their family and friends get a chance to congratulate them also.

And there's a bonus to opening the graduations to the public; Bryant hopes it helps shatter the stigma around addiction and mental health battles.

Accountability courts are meant to offer rehabilitation, cutting down on the likelihood of repeat offenses by giving non-violent drug charge defendants a chance to treat the problems that brought them to court in the first place.

Those who go down that path to bettering themselves are subject to extensive judi-

cial monitoring. This includes regular drug testing and court-imposed sanctions, but there are benefits for those going through the program.

Counseling to address the behavioral issues and trauma that usually lead to substance abuse is part of the deal along with educational, vocational and life-skill training as well as socialization. Depending on individual cases, certain incentives and exceptions may be offered.

For example, if a defendant has his or her license revoked and is otherwise eligible for the program, he or she may be allowed to drive to job applications, court dates and other

See *Graduation*, Page 12



The Accountability Courts graduation last month was a joyous affair for the family and friends of recovering addicts. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Lake Levels

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Blue Ridge 1,672.83
Chatuge 1,918.42
Nottely 1,762.19

Notice of Special Primary/Election See Page 2

Daylight Saving Time Starts Sunday, March 9



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Towns County Lions host Local Hospice Care Specialist



L-R: Program Director Kathy Carlson, Program Speaker Kayla Hubbard, Club President Danny Meeks

The Towns County Lions Club welcomed Kayla Hubbard, Care Specialist with Empyrean Hospice, as their program speaker at the February 25 meeting in the lobby of the Anderson Music Hall.

Empyrean Hospice serves ten counties in Northeast Georgia and is available to help in the transition from curative treatment to comfort care. Hubbard noted that it's important to realize that hospice care is not only for the last few days of a patient's life, it can sometimes be necessary for weeks or even months. Her presentation contained valu-

able information pertaining to the circumstances and conditions when patients and their families need to consider hospice care. The earlier hospice care can begin after the patient has been appropriately evaluated, the more opportunity the hospice care team has to favorably impact the patient's positive quality of life.

In other Lions news, club President Danny Meeks reminded all members of the next regular club meeting on March 11, 6 PM, as well as the second meeting in March on Saturday, the 29th, which will be the special celebration of the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Towns County Lions Club.

This event will be a 1

PM dinner catered by Brenda Swanson at the McConnell Baptist Church Family Life Center with District and Zone Lions dignitaries and leaders in attendance along with local club members. Past International Director Kembra Smith will be the guest keynote speaker.

Georgia Mountain Fair concert fans, don't forget, that legendary "Lil Ole Band from Texas", ZZ Top, returns to the Anderson Music Hall, March 18, 7 PM.

This March, 2025 is an extraordinary time in the history, legacy and life of the 85 year old Towns County Lions Club. We thank our local friends for all your support over these many years!

Wildlife in Your Backyard at Hiawassee Garden Club



February Hostesses: (L-R) Sue Livingston, Shaleila O'Neal, Gerry Meade, Ellen Luckenbach; Gerry Meade made the St. Patrick's Day design

Hiawassee Garden Club member, Elaine Williams, put on such an interesting program at the February 27, 2025 meeting, now being held in the morning at the Clubhouse. She stressed that the "wildlife" she's speaking of is really only birds, butterflies, bees and bugs.

Williams had set up a table display of how to attract this wildlife, with food, water and shelter. She had several pots of flowers that are favorites of all of them, a small dish of water for the butterflies and bugs—birdbath for the birds, and houses for bluebirds, other birds and bats (all available at the T.C. Farmers Market), and leave some hollow stems around for bugs. We will be having other upcoming pro-

grams on some of these things in more detail.

Hostesses, Sue Livingston, Shaleila O'Neal, Gerry Meade, Ellen Luckenbach, for this "almost March" meeting had a St. Patrick's Day theme with Gerry making a very pretty design of snapdragons, daisies, and white pine and rhododendron greenery.

HGC celebrated Arbor Day in Georgia, Friday, February 21st, with members and some GA Forestry Commission men, who dug the hole for a Cherokee Red Dogwood in the front yard. This was generously donated by the Dennison Brothers Landscaping on Hog Creek in Hiawassee. Thank you to all who participated.

A Mosaic Art Class was

held by Cheri Erickson and Cheryl Gehring at the Clubhouse on February 22nd with 22 people attending. Some beautiful rocks are now decorating many homes and yards. They also have held many fun classes at the T.C. Senior Center which are loved by the seniors.

Check out our activities on Facebook, under Hiawassee Garden Club.

Our next meeting will be Thursday, March 27th, with Extension Service Agent Jacob Williams telling us how to get our gardens ready for this season. We welcome guests to any meeting, now 10 a.m. at the Clubhouse on River St., directly behind the Courthouse Park at the Courthouse Annex or in the HGC yard.

Air Force Veteran Robert Manson receives Quilt of Valor for service

On January 22, 2025, Mr. Robert (Bob) Manson, of Young Harris, GA, was presented with a beautiful Quilt of Valor by Appalachian Hospice of Blairsville and Misty Mountain Quilters Guild. He was surrounded by his loving wife of 30 years, Ann Manson, other family members, friends, and hospice staff members.

Mr. Manson served our country in the United States Air Force and Air Force Reserves from 1961-1967 as an Air Policeman. He received training at Lackland AFB, Texas. Additionally, he completed coursework in Military Justice. His last military assignment was at McCord AFB in Washington State. Bob also had a distinguished career in law enforcement, serving with the Okeechobee County Sheriff's Department in Florida.



Ann and Veteran Robert (Bob) Manson

The outstanding quilt was made by quilters in the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild, which is one of hundreds of quilting groups in the United States that make patriotic quilts for veterans who have been "touched by war" as they defended our country at home and in many posts throughout the world. To date more than 403,609 quilts have been awarded. The Quilts of Valor Foundation (www.qovf.com) was founded in 2003 by Catherine Roberts

to honor men and women serving in all branches of the military.

The tradition for presentation is to wrap the veteran in the quilt or lay it on them with a hug or a handshake. They also receive a certificate noting that the quilt is awarded as an "expression of gratitude from a grateful nation."

For more information about nominating a veteran to receive a quilt, go to www.mistymountain-quiltguild.org/quilts-of-valor.

or c.forsyth@appalachianhospice.com.

Local SAR and DAR celebrate George Washington's birthday



(L-R): Jared Ogden, President; Jack Dugger, Registrar; Emil Decker, guest speaker; Barbara Weaver, Regent; Stephen Weaver, Secretary/Treasurer; John Mays, Sergeant at Arms

Five Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter members, SAR, joined with the Regent of the Old Unicoi Trail Chapter DAR to celebrate George Washington's birthday on February 22nd.

General Washington was born on February 22, 1732. SAR members from Northeast Georgia gathered next to his statue in Gainesville, GA, to pay tribute to one of our country's founding fathers. Celebratory remarks by BRMC member Emil Decker recounted how General Washington did not celebrate his birthday. During pre-Revolutionary America, colonists celebrated British Monarch's birthdays, but the custom of commemorating personal birthdays had not evolved.

After the revolution and General Washington's assumption of the office of President, colonists began honoring his birthday, substituting his birthday for the King's. In 1968, Congress officially designated Washington's Birth-



(L-R): Marty Dillinger guest speaker, Sid Turner, VP, Stephen Weaver, Immediate Past President

day a Federal Holiday to be observed on the third Monday of February. Many citizens wished to change the holiday's name from Washington's Birthday to Presidents Day to honor Abraham Lincoln, too. However, Congress never officially changed the name of the holiday. So, although commonly called Presidents Day,

the official name for the Third Monday of each February remains Washington's Birthday.

Recently, chapter members were taught an introductory genealogy lesson by Marty Dillinger, a well-known amateur genealogist. Her presentation focused on little-known genealogical sources available online.

March Garden Chores from your Master Gardener Extension Volunteers

Trees and Shrubs - Complete all major pruning by mid-March. Maple trees bleed sap when pruned now, it's better to wait until late April.

Do not prune spring flowering shrubs like forsythia and quince until after they have bloomed or you will not get any blooms this year. Only prune crape myrtles if needed, removing any suckers, cross branches and dead branches. Prune roses back to about half their present size before buds break and began fertilizing as buds break.

Fertilize trees and shrubs following label instructions in March and follow with an application in early May and early June. Cut back your butterfly bush to half the size you want it to become this summer. Plant bare-root roses in soil that contains organic matter that has been thoroughly tilled.

Pull mulch at least six inches away from tree trunks to prevent soggy conditions and possible disease or insect damage.

Plant broadleaf evergreens and prune evergreen shrubs back to a manageable size before new growth starts. Purchase azaleas when they are in bloom so you will be sure of the color you are buying.

Vegetables - Start planting cool season vegetables in late March - carrots, radishes, lettuce, collards, English peas, spinach, and beets. Warm season vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, corn and okra should be planted after the soil temperature warms up and the danger of frost

has passed.

Start vegetable and summer annual seeds indoors. Your seedlings will be ready to transplant into your garden after the soil temperature warms up in six to eight weeks.

Planting the same vegetables in the same spot in your garden year after year can lead to an accumulation of insects and diseases in your soil. To avoid this problem, rotate your crops.

Flowerbeds - Divide overgrown hostas, daylilies and other perennials and ground covers as needed when you see the leaves unfurling above ground. Dig up the new flowerbeds you plan to plant this spring when the soil is not soggy and mix in plenty of organic matter.

Rejuvenate the pansies you planted last fall by fertilizing them with a water-soluble fertilizer as the temperature warms up. English ivy can be very invasive. Good ground-cover substitutes include ajuga, mondo grass and creeping raspberry.

Avoid mixing freshly cut daffodils with other flowers in arrangements because they produce a chemical that injures blooms. Place daffodils in another container for a day after cutting, then rinse the stems before arranging.

Spring bulbs should be fertilized as flowers fade. Remove foliage only after it begins to fade. Fertilize spring bulbs with a 10-10-10 fertilizer (one pound of fertilizer per 100 square feet of flowerbed).

To help control weeds in your garden, apply a two to

three-inch layer of mulch. Sprinkle crushed eggshells around plants susceptible to slugs and snails, especially hostas.

Be on the lookout for summer bulbs at your favorite garden center. For better selection, buy them when they become available but do not plant them until late April or early May. Plant clematis and other vines and put out hummingbird feeders.

Soil Test - Have your garden soil tested. Your County Extension Agent has soil test bags and instructions.

If your soil test indicates that you need to add lime, it needs to be added two to three months prior to planting your garden.

Houseplants - Repot root bound houseplants before moving them outdoors in warm weather and begin fertilizing them at half the recommended strength. If you want flowers on your cactus, plant it in a small pot. Most cactuses bloom sooner if rootbound.

Miscellaneous - Set your lawnmower blade on its highest setting and cut back liriope before new growth begins, being careful not to damage the crown of the plant. Sharpen or replace lawn mower blades if you have not already done so.

Lift stepping stones that have sunk below grass level, spread sand in the low area and replace the stepping stone. Clean leaves and other debris from ponds and water features.

Jo Anne Allen
Master Gardener
Extension Volunteer
706-400-8139

Water Main Break...from Page 1

ers out of water. The following main roads may be experiencing water outages at this time:

"Crooked Creek Road, Crooked Creek Connector, Highway 66, Townsend Mill Road, Byers Creek Road, Crane Creek Road, Townsend Mill Road, Gumlog Road, Ashland Cove, Pinecrest, and Warne, North Carolina. Any side roads off these roads will also be affected."

Nichols said Water Authority employees worked to repair the leak all night "and finally got everything back in order around 6:30 am on Wednesday morning."

As for the reason behind the break, Nichols said it was possible the ground may have shifted in the days leading up to the incident or that time had simply worn down the area around that pipe down.

"Unfortunately, with a leak that size, it began to drain our main storage tank very quickly," she added. "That 100,000-gallon tank supplies about 1,250 locations as well as Brasstown Valley Resort.

"We are currently attempting to secure funding to

build a 300,000-gallon storage tank on the west end of our water system. Extra storage capacity would be a great advantage to help maintain potable water and fire service during leaks such as this one."

Nichols said the extent of the leak, with the drained storage tank, meant there was a 12- to 24-hour recovery time before Towns County Water could restore its system to normal working conditions and water pressures following the repair.

"Water conservation by our customers during these occurrences is so greatly appreciated since it allows our tank to fill so much quicker, and we appreciate all of our customers' understanding," she said.

The Water Authority manager has asked that as many people as possible get signed up with CodeRED to receive local notifications in such events. People may sign up by visiting <http://www.townscountyga.org/emergency-alert-system.html>.

"With an outage this size, we cannot call everyone back, especially that late at

night," Nichols said. "Therefore, the CodeRED robocall system is the quickest way for us to get the word out. The more residents that sign up for it on the Towns County Commissioner's website, the better."

Nichols said that customers of Hiawassee Water, which supplies the Water Authority, would not have been affected by last week's main break "other than our pumps having to run longer to fill our tank back up."

Speaking of Hiawassee Water, Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. said the city had been working to repair leaks of its own last week, one of which was also dispatched to the public via CodeRED on Feb. 25.

"This was a leak off Lower Bell Creek and Bradshaw Road, and they had to shut several people down (for water)," Chastain said, adding that the city also dealt with leaks on Bugsuffle Road and Victoria Woods Drive, making more than two dozen city leak repairs for the year so far. "It has been an eventful week in the water business."

HB 581 Opt Out...from Page 1

making this decision. Perhaps the most critical piece of information for residents is that opting out of the new exemption does not affect the local homestead exemption that places a 3% cap on annual reassessments of homes, which has been in place since local voters supported it in 2008.

"This has been a very confusing bill, to say the least," Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. said in a Feb. 20 hearing. "It has new developments, it seems, daily. As I'm sure everyone has already heard, Young Harris voted last to opt out. Basically, we're here because I want to hear your opinions."

City Attorney Thomas Mitchell said there were three main components of HB 581: it changed the way the county assessor performs valuations and appeals of assessments; created a mechanism for local governments to adopt a Floating Local Option Sales Tax, or FLOST; and created the floating homestead exemption.

"In Towns County, 66% of the population voted in favor of the constitutional amendment," Mitchell said. "The floating homestead exemption caps the increase in value of homestead property at no more than the rate of inflation, which is defined by the Consumer Price Index."

"Unlike many jurisdictions in the state, Hiawassee already has an adjusted-base homestead exemption, which was adopted in 2008. That law caps increases in value for homestead properties at 3%."

Public attendance was relatively sparse across the three hearings, but among attendees in the second hearing, former mayor Liz Ordiales highlighted some of the reasons she believed the city should opt out.

"I think the floating percentage could be very detrimental to the city," Ordiales said. "We already have a 3% cap. Why not leave it at that? For the city to go with a floating exemption and then implement these other sales taxes, I believe is a problem."

"Right now, we the city generate 68% of all the local tax money that comes into the county, but we only get 13% of that. That fluctuation using the CPI will cause more trouble

than it's worth.

"It's hard for the mayor to set up a budget because you can't know what the cost of living is going to be for next year. Then you get to argue with the county about what percentage is going to go to the city, and that's going to be next to nothing."

And all the public deliberations perfectly demonstrated the purpose of required public hearings, as the thinking on the council evolved from initially wanting to opt in to an ultimate vote to opt out.

Explaining her own evolution on the issue, Hiawassee City Councilwoman Amy Barrett said Feb. 20 that, initially, she was "thinking about opting in because the homeowner gets the benefit of whatever is best for them, the CPI or the 3%."

"But at the same time, I wonder if the benefit is enough to justify the chaos of the budget or the Assessor's Office," Barrett said. "I don't want to go against what educated voters want for their city, but people are saying tonight that they did not understand everything because of the way the ballot measure was worded. There are so many unanswered questions."

"As I was listening to Mayor Andrea Gibby of Young Harris in her meeting the other night, I thought, this is something we need to watch and see if this is a good thing. If it is, we can always opt back in. But once you opt in, you can never opt out. That scares me."

"Giving it a year isn't going to make or break us, and if it's just a year, we're not going to miss out on much, in my opinion. I wonder how many of our voters knew that we already have a 3% cap?"

Councilwoman Nancy Noblet agreed with Barrett's assessment in the public hearings, saying that she, too, thought she wanted to opt in at first.

"But the more I talked to people and researched it, the less I wanted to," Noblet said. "I don't want to put any more burden on the city than is already on it. We get taxed to death already. I'm leaning towards opting out, but I still want to hear everyone's opinions before I make a final decision."

Councilman Jonathan

Wilson shared a similar opinion: "I'd like to opt out and wait a year and see what happens."

"My opinion on this is pretty clear," Chastain said. "This has never been a good idea for smaller jurisdictions. I'd like to see how it affects us for a year. I'd like to keep my options open. I'm a property owner in the city and also trying to run a city, so I have to look at it both ways."

"We have the 3% cap in place and have been running OK. So long as I can keep the services coming and not have to cut services, I think we're all good."

"What it means is that if we opt out, it basically gives us another year to see how this is going to affect us. If you've already got a homestead exemption in Towns County, it's not going to affect you at all if we opt out."

"And the FLOST money can be only 1% anyway, because the maximum sales tax in Georgia can only be 9%. Then it goes to a referendum and has to be voted on by the citizens. The money will go to the county, and they divvy it out, so we would get pennies. Since the county already enjoys the 3% cap, it's kind of a wash."

Comments from others in attendance for the Feb. 20 public hearings ranged from concerns about adding more bureaucracy, the possibility of raising the sales tax again, the misleading wording of the ballot measure that has resulted in many citizens voting for something without full knowledge of the implications that follow, the risk of using a floating percentage rather than the mechanism the city currently has in place, an additional administrative burden, and the difficulty of trying to create a budget from an unknown number.

Several attendees from the public pointed out that the benefits of opting in seemed to be fewer than the risks, foreshadowing the council's vote a week later to opt out.

Both Towns County Schools and Towns County Government have opted in to the new exemption, largely because of the minimal impact the new exemption is expected to have considering the 3% cap that is already in place.

County Meeting...from Page 1

assist with the uninsured costs associated with PTSD treatment and to cover it," Kiker said. "A first responder may access the benefits quickly and confidentially without worrying about the stigma or job loss."

Commissioner Bradshaw joined Kiker in explaining that, in Towns County's case, that support program would be self-funded. It will not replace current medical coverage for county employees.

Financial benefits will come from the General Fund or may also be sourced from an account set aside specifically for PTSD treatment, which Bradshaw said was a consideration.

Last summer, high schoolers had the opportunity to earn a little cash by taking on an internship at the Towns County Courthouse. The positions come by way of a grant through the Association County Commissioners of Georgia called the Georgia Civic Awareness Program for Students.

Interns earn \$15 hourly through the season and mostly handle filing jobs. Bradshaw said the office is looking to hire another student this summer due to renewal of the grant for 2025; both high school and college attendees are eligible.

A couple of regularly examined documents were also brought to the table for maintenance. Bradshaw approved the 2025 Agreement for Consultant Services with ATLAS, the company that monitors methane gas levels at the landfill.



Commissioner Bradshaw welcomed County Attorney Robb Kiker to discuss the first responder PTSD resolution he signed in the February county meeting.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

In addition, Bradshaw authorized a new service agreement with TK Elevator for maintenance of the elevators installed during the courthouse remodel. Both elevators in the building are covered for \$455 per month, and the chairlift costs amount to \$65 monthly.

"We had free maintenance on the elevators for up to a year for this building, and now that's coming to an end," Bradshaw said. "By law, we have to have a service agreement with the company to service the elevators and of course to repair them if there's any problems."

Bradshaw also provided an update on the Splash Pad that is due to be installed at the Towns County Beach this year; construction will start any day, weather permitting.

A similar update was given for the community pavilion next to the Pickleball Courts & Complex. The grading is done, concrete has been poured, and rough plumbing will be completed with cooperation from the weather.

County finances were noted as stable, and Bradshaw informed the public county fuel mileage reimbursements were upped from 58 cents to 70 cents per mile to match the rates of surrounding areas. This is mostly applicable to attorneys travelling for the Eno-Tah Judicial Circuit.

The commissioner holds his regular meetings on the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. inside the courthouse. The public is encouraged to attend.

Blairsville VA Clinic hosts social in honor of National Vietnam War Veterans Day March 28th



Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 is supporting the Blairsville VA Clinic's effort to host a social honoring our Vietnam War Veterans Friday, March 28 (which coincides with National Vietnam War Veterans Day March 29) 10:30 AM to 1:30 PM on the clinic parking

lot (weather permitting). Reservations are required to ensure enough refreshments and spouses are invited. Reservations need be made by email to blairsvilleva@gmail.com before Friday, March 14th.

Please respond with the Vietnam-era Veteran's full name and the number of people in your party. Do not contact the clinic for reservations or questions so as not to interfere with their normal services to patients.

"Although we are the Blairsville Chapter, this event is open to Vietnam-era Veterans in Union, Towns and Fannin Counties," Malcolm McRaney III, chapter president noted. "However, please RSVP ASAP to ensure the clinic has refreshments and space for everyone."

The event is meant to thank and honor veterans of the Vietnam War and to highlight the brave and faithful service of the Armed Forces during a very divisive period of American history.

As part of the event, local band "Struck by Lightning II" will be performing.

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Special Election...from Page 1

proved by the Board and is simply awaiting execution by the City, is similar to the prior agreement, except it will automatically terminate each year.

“This way, the Board and the City can make tweaks here and there from year to year as necessary in a better effort to maintain best practices and adapt to any changes in

the election laws.

“The Board is modifying their internal policies to ensure that the agreement is negotiated and approved by the end of February each year, just as this one has been, and trusts that the City will do the same.

“Again, the Board looks forward to conducting the

June and November elections for the City of Hiawassee and hopes to have as strong a voter turnout as there was with the 2024 General Election.”

As for the council seat up for grabs in the June election, that’s to fill the unexpired term of Councilman Chastain, who has publicly announced he will be stepping down to

run for mayor. Chastain’s Post 3 council term runs through Dec. 31, 2027.

The Special Election will be in addition to the Municipal General Election on Nov. 4, which will see the elections of mayor as well as Council Posts 1 and 2 that are currently held by Amy Barrett and Patsy Owens, respectively, for terms running Jan. 1, 2026, through Dec. 31, 2029.

A qualifying period will be set for the Special Election, and qualifying for the General Election will take place Aug. 20-22.

The Special Election was among the business discussed in the Feb. 24 council work session, which lasted more than two hours in the upstairs training room of Hiawassee City Hall.

In other business, Chastain commended the diligence and work ethic of city employees, including Water Department personnel who have kept busy fixing leaks, and City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick, who just earned a certificate for completing a program in management and development.

“This has taken her over two years to complete, and I

personally want to thank her for her commitment to this, and I’d like to give her a round of applause,” said Chastain, who has completed 42 hours of training himself since filling in as acting mayor.

Justin Burruss of the Rushton accounting firm said the FY 2024 audit showed the City of Hiawassee to be in good condition financially, with one negative finding related to a lapse in water bill adjustments that has already been corrected.

Councilman Jonathon Wilson began a discussion regarding the idea of a council pay increase.

“It is hard to do this and another full-time job,” Wilson said. “When we have special called meetings, I’m having to call out from work. I work for the county in public safety and I have to get coverage. It takes several hours out of my day for very little pay.

“To get other people in here to do this, to get people other than retirees, it’s a little hard to do this for only \$200 per month. Maybe we could bump it up just a little bit. I’ve looked at several cities that are about our size, and we are

on the lower end of the pay scale.”

City Attorney Thomas Mitchell laid out the requirements should the council decide to pursue the idea. The earliest such an increase could take effect, if approved by the council, would be January 2026, after the next election. Approval would be needed prior to August qualifying.

Wastewater Treatment Plant Director Clint Royce said new equipment and upgrades to the filter system were needed. Most of the items he needs are on backorder, sometimes for up to six months, so he is proactively working to keep the plant operating efficiently.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay reported that “we’re getting closer to the Paris Business Center” being finished, which the city and Downtown Development Authority will celebrate with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

“I’m not going to give a date because every time I do something changes,” McKay added. “It is getting closer. It looks like a building on the inside.”

Graduation...from Page 1

er important meetings.

“The image of those scales of justice are always in balance, they’re always right, but as you probably know – and is sometimes the truth – those balanced scales aren’t exactly the way lives get left,” said Hon. T. Buckley “Buck” Levins, Superior Court Judge of the Enotah Circuit. “Our accountability courts are an endeavor to fix and stand in that breach, to recognize when people have journeys that need to be made.”

Levins introduced the program and read off small biographies for each graduate, highlighting their positive traits and the growth he’s seen them accomplish as part of the programs.

“These graduates are an embodiment of how to restore somebody to the person they want to be, the person their

families truly always knew and the person that they deserve to be for their children,” Levins added.

Bryant and Levins agreed that the overarching goals of accountability courts of any type are to reunite families and treat people with dignity. Bryant, for her part, sees the programs as successes, judging by the proud graduates and a crowded room full of their loved ones.

District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter, who administered the keynote address, was of the same opinion.

“When I was a judge and I worked with people in the Drug Court or those who came in front of me in court, I always kept it in mind that ... most of the folks who came in front of me were good people who just made bad decisions,” Gunter stated.

Some of the graduates

and their families took the opportunity to speak. Britton Barr, a Union County graduate of both programs, was first to share. Now a member of Freedom Ministries, Barr has also found employment at Union General Hospital as a phlebotomist.

“Addiction takes you to depths of water that are so deep, you can’t even see the light,” Barr said, describing his old life as one defined by “(overdoses) and jail.”

“You are sick. You are lost. You need help. I needed help. This program is my saving grace, and I truly believe God intervened in my life at that time.”

Then, Jason Cunningham, a fellow Union County graduate of NEDC, addressed the crowd. Cunningham “has a beautiful future planned” and is proud to be the father he always wanted to be for his daughter.

“I thank God for the strength that he gave me to ... get through this, and He helped me to make a change,” Cunningham admitted, also voicing his thanks for the accountability court program. “If you can just imagine a gate, gratitude is the hinge that sobriety swings by.”

Graduates received certificates and challenge coins before treating themselves to refreshments and conversation with court team members and friends they’d made through the program. Many of them, however, were just happy to recognize their new leases on life.

“If you’re dedicated and want that life, that change, (accountability court) is not hard at all,” said Towns County participant Melissa O’Keefe after the graduation. “For any new participants, keep your head up and just look at your peers. And it’ll be good.”

Towns County Fire Rescue Seeking New Volunteers



Have you ever wanted to give back to your community or be a part of it in a special way? If so come join us at Towns County Fire and Rescue.

We are seeking new volunteers to become a part of our family; we are also looking for Explorer Firefighters to be a part of our explorer program (ages 14-18). No experience is required. We will provide all equipment needed and all

training needed which will consist of Firefighting training and basic first aid and CPR. You will assist with special events in our community and respond to a variety of emergency calls from fires to medical calls and search and rescue calls.

There is a job for everyone in the fire service so come be apart of our great team of firefighters and family to help us better serve our community and county.

For more information and to meet us and check out our equipment come by Fire Station one in Hiawassee City limits at 156 Sims Circle or give us a call at 706-896-2090 anytime from 8 AM to 4 PM, Monday-Friday, we will be happy to speak to you and answer any questions you may have.